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ABSTRACT

This seminar brought together professionals from three fields--higher education, philanthropy and journalism. Discussed at the seminar was the role that these professions play in public life. It was noted that there is increasing dismay over the public's declining trust in America's institutions. Professional reform efforts to remedy this situation have made progress in the fields of journalism and philanthropy. In the past, the field of higher education has given low priority to civic work. Also, research at institutes of higher learning tends to be organized around academic disciplines rather than civic responsibilities. Whether the ideas presented at the seminar will take root in the field of higher education remains to be seen. (JM)

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JUNE 1998

Seminar

ON THE

Professions

and

Public Life

A REPORT BY
SCOTT LONDON

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The Seminar on the Professions and Public Life brought together a remarkable group of some 70 individuals — scholars, policymakers, journalists, foundation executives, public opinion researchers, citizen activists, and leaders in the world of higher education — to explore one of America's most pressing challenges: the decline of civic engagement and the crisis of confidence in our major institutions. Held in Washington, D.C. in late June 1998, the two-day working seminar was aimed at bringing together professionals from three institutions in particular — higher education, philanthropy, and the press — to share notes, identify common interests and, hopefully, deepen the discussion about the role of the professions in public life.

For the last decade or more, scholars, elected officials, journalists, and others have spoken with increasing dismay about the public's declining trust in America's political and social institutions. Evidence shows that many Americans believe politics has evolved into a "system" made up of various institutions and political forces that shuts them out of the democratic process. People are disenchanted not only with government but also with many professions that they feel have driven a wedge between the citizenry and the political process. The waning credibility of the professions is compounded by a still deeper problem: the lack of what might be called "civic imagination" in America. Many people find it difficult to imagine being part of an engaged and purposeful citizenry, taking responsibility on themselves for what is happening in their neighborhoods and communities.

The problems of public life have been at the center of a number of institutional reform efforts in recent years. More and more professionals are beginning to acknowledge that restoring public trust and promoting civic engagement cannot be achieved through piecemeal efforts such as public relations campaigns, community outreach projects, or public service initiatives. These ventures may be useful in the short run. But unless they focus on bringing people together and building civic capacity, they will fail to have any lasting impact. And unless they focus on discerning the real problems that people experience and want addressed, they will only exacerbate an already strained relationship with the public.

The effort to rethink the role of institutions in public life is already well along in some professions. In journalism, for example, a growing number of people in newsrooms, professional associations, universities, and other settings are working on a new approach that incorporates the imperatives of citizen discussion and debate into coverage of public issues. Similarly, a group of foundation leaders are actively exploring new strategies of grantmaking that can help build what they call "civil infrastructure" in American communities. Some colleges and universities are also beginning to take

steps in this direction — though it's still too early to speak of a bona fide movement. For example, a number of universities have reshaped their curricula to better integrate research, teaching and community engagement, for instance. Some humanities scholars are also developing a concept of "public scholarship" that reassesses the traditional distinction between specialized academic knowledge and the what might be called practical "public knowledge."

The question is whether there are any points of convergence in the civic work taking place in journalism, philanthropy, and higher education. As Kettering Foundation president David Mathews noted in his opening remarks, "We are a research foundation aimed at testing hypotheses and possibilities. What we would like to test here is whether these various interests and points of view have some chance of converging—whether journalists, foundation leaders, state legislators, and people who run higher education have something to say to each other that is informative." If that's the case, he added, "I could see the prospects for something like what our friends in science call the Genome Project — a massive, multiyear effort to bring together all the expertise and understanding we can."

HOW CITIZENS FEEL ABOUT DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT

Setting the tone for the seminar was public opinion researcher John Doble who opened with a review of "Governing America: Our Choices, Our Challenge." Prepared for the Kettering Foundation in June 1998, the report examines public thinking on the issue of democratic government. Doble and his colleagues analyzed the views of over 1,400 citizens as they deliberated in National Issues Forums (NIF) — a voluntary, nonpartisan network of forums and study circles in communities across the country — about how to improve democratic governance in the United States.

What the study revealed, Doble told seminar participants, was that despite our nation's peace and prosperity the public continues to feel deeply alienated from, frustrated by, and generally displeased with government. "The public antipathy that was so prevalent in 1994 has been blunted for the moment," he said. "But if you scratch just beneath the surface, you will find that the disaffection, the alienation, and the cynicism is still there, and it's still there in very vivid terms."

What was noteworthy about the forums, according

> ***The public antipathy that was so prevalent in 1994 has been blunted for the moment. But if you scratch just beneath the surface, you will find that the disaffection, the alienation, and the cynicism is still there, and it's there in very vivid terms.***
>
> **John Doble**
> **Doble Research Associates**

to Doble, was that in spite of the highly politicized nature of the issue, people spoke in pragmatic and non-ideological terms. They stressed that money and powerful contributors alienate citizens from politics and public officials. They felt that government should be made more efficient (though not necessarily at the expense of essential social services). And local government was generally regarded as more manageable and responsive to the public than state and federal agencies.

What the forums reveal is that the government may not, in fact, have the full consent of the governed, because citizens feel that the government is both out of touch with them and in the service of special interest.

Claire Snyder
Illinois State University

One of the study's most significant findings concerned people's perceptions of citizenship. Though forum participants stressed the need to rekindle a sense of citizenship, they found it hard to envision what an engaged public might look like. They lacked metaphors or "mental pictures" of civic engagement, Doble explained. "People in the forums found it hard to conceptualize how a community could come together on a sustained basis to deliberate about common problems. Our overriding sense was that people need to see possibilities. They need new ways of envisioning what the public sphere is and what citizenship can be. They need to see examples in order to truly understand how to rediscover citizenship. They need new models and ideas."

THE PUBLIC AND THE PROFESSIONS: A DEEPENING DIVIDE

The Doble report presents a sobering picture of American public life. As citizens see it, our political system takes its cues not from the people but from a professional political class controlled by money rather than votes. "What the forums reveal is that the government may not, in fact, have the full consent of the governed," observed Claire Snyder of Illinois State University. "Citizens feel that the government is both out of touch with them and in the service of special interests." Since many Americans feel that "the system" is fundamentally incapable of solving our problems as a society, they withdraw from public activities altogether and leave politics to "the professionals."

The public finds itself in a curious postmodern predicament, as William Sullivan of LaSalle University pointed out. "Just as the postmodern theorists are going on endlessly about how all knowledge is really just a disguised expression of power, that turns out to be what a great number of citizens apparently do think in day-to-day life. That obviously ends the possibility of democracy — of a public or common life."

The prevailing mood in America represents an indictment not just against government but also against our major democratic institutions. In

the public's view, institutions both represent and grant legitimacy to "the system." Moreover, they help foster an ethos of professionalism that elevates the role of "experts" over that of regular citizens. Americans no longer perceive the professional as "one of us," as several participants pointed out. Instead, they see the lawyer, the journalist, and the doctor as members of a specialized elite who claim to speak on the behalf of the public but do not actually represent it.

> ***Far too often the professions act on behalf of the public. They do not work with the public. In my experience, working on behalf of the public is somewhat arrogant and very much resisted by the public. The public does not want professionals or journalists or others to work on their behalf. They want them to work with them.***
>
> **Cole Campbell**
> ***St. Louis Post-Dispatch***

Sandral Hullett, executive director of West Alabama Health Services, commented that in her community people are deeply distrustful of academics because, in her words, "they are the people who know everything. They come to town, they talk a lot, and they don't listen." People in the community feel used by the university because researchers typically "come in and do surveys upon surveys upon surveys, then they don't share the information with the people they did the surveys on." The logic of professionalism is also deeply ingrained in the news trade, as Jay Rosen of New York University pointed out. Journalists typically make the important news decisions among themselves and then "fire salvos of information" at people.

Healing the rift between the public and the professions requires that institutions reexamine their working assumptions about public life. It requires that they begin to work *with* the public, rather than *on behalf of* the public, in the words of Cole Campbell, editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. "I think far too often the professions act on behalf of the public. They don't work *with* the public. In my experience, working *on behalf of* the public is somewhat arrogant and very much resisted by the public. The public does not want professionals or journalists or others to work on their behalf. They want them to work *with* them."

PUBLIC JOURNALISM

Cole Campbell is one of a growing number of journalists, editors, publishers, and others in the news business who are actively rethinking the role of the press in public life. The movement is aimed not simply at improving the presentation of news or meeting the changing demands of newspaper readers. The goal is to provide a place where shared information is discussed and translated into public action.

Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at NYU and one of the movement's

central players, noted that public journalism began as a conversation among a small number of journalists and newspaper editors who realized that their best efforts to reach out to their readership — through citizen forums, lengthy six- or eight-part series on community issues, or new "solutions-oriented" approaches — had little or no effect. After wrestling with the problem for some time, they began to realize that they were wedded to a largely unquestioned set of professional assumptions as journalists. They shared an ethos that had been passed down from their teachers and mentors, and reinforced over coffee, at the water cooler, in meetings. The public had no real place in this worldview. Readers were commonly viewed, in Campbell's words, as either "a consumer whom we have to please in some way, or an idiot whom we can ignore."

The question that emerged from their search was: How can newspapers *connect* people — not only to the newspaper but to each other, and to public life. "You can't think of the relationship between the press and the people," Campbell said. "You have to think of the relationship between the press and the people *and* public life. When you see those three sets of relationships in comparison, you begin to understand that no matter what the press does to improve its image or connection with the people, it's not enough. The press also has to be mindful of the connection between people and public life. Therefore the press has to be mindful of its own connection in terms of *describing* public life."

If you can get people together long enough to develop trust and to actually get interested together in a problem or an issue, that is your best opportunity for enabling people to grow into a common understanding. That is the general idea behind a great deal of what goes on in the civic journalism movement. It is simply the process of clarifying together what people believe or know.

William Sullivan
LaSalle University

Public journalism takes inspiration from a variety of intellectual figures, including Jürgen Habermas, Daniel Yankelovich, James Carey and, most notably, John Dewey. In their own ways, each of these thinkers has systematically examined how the public goes about reasoning and solving its problems. Their work shows that public judgment is not, as is commonly believed, the aggregated opinions of all the individuals who comprise the public. Rather it's the result of a deliberative process by which individuals subject their ideas and opinions to the test of public controversy. John Dewey and Jane Addams referred to it as "group inquiry." As William Sullivan explained, they believed that "if you could get people together long enough to develop trust and to actually get interested together in a problem or an issue, that was your best opportunity for enabling people to grow into a common understanding. That is the general rubric for a great deal of what goes on in

the civic journalism movement. It's simply the process of clarifying together what people believe or know."

CIVIL INVESTING

The ideas and initiatives underlying public journalism are also taking root in the foundation world. Over the last five years, a small group of grantmakers have been actively exploring how philanthropy can help build and strengthen public life. The effort stems from an increasingly pervasive sense that, despite its best efforts, philanthropy has done very little to stem the decline of civic engagement in the U.S. If anything, grantmakers may have unwittingly exacerbated the problem — by reinforcing the ethos of professionalism, for example, and by attempting to resolve intractable social problems using overly procedural and scientific methods.

The civil-investing movement is also a response to what Bruce Sievers of the San Francisco-based Walter and Elise Haas Fund calls philanthropy's "public agenda problem": citizens no longer trust private foundations to protect and promote public interests. Grantmakers are faced with "an interesting conundrum," Sievers said, because their own definitions of the common good do not always coincide with those of the public. The goal of foundation work is often described as "private wealth for public benefit." But who decides what constitutes "public benefit" — the public or the institution? Until foundations can answer that question, they will continue to suffer from low credibility with the public.

Much of the civil-investing work has focused on developing new systems of evaluation. As more and more grantmakers are discovering, traditional methods of evaluation are often ineffective — and sometimes even counterproductive — because of their short-term focus and their heavy emphasis on quantifiable results. The best community development efforts, they maintain, are those that focus on bringing the public together in settings where they can discuss and deliberate about their common problems and then work toward solutions together.

Some foundations are also experimenting with new funding strategies. For example, the Dade County Community Foundation in Florida has introduced a grant-making approach that emphasizes community building. Foundation president Ruth Shack explained that grant-seekers who can "prove that they are bridg-

> ***Grantmakers have discovered something similar to what journalists have discovered: They are very good at pursuing their own ideas about how to serve the public interest. What they aren't so good at is championing collective goods — strengthening civil society, engaging with the public, and cultivating public values.***
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> **Jay Rosen**
> **New York University**

ing barriers, that they are talking to people they would not have talked to otherwise, and that they are partnering with someone across town," are given highest priority. Shack feels that community foundations are the most natural place to begin experimenting with civil investment strategies because of their institutional commitment to strengthening cities and neighborhoods and their experience in dealing directly with the public at the local level.

The significance of the civil-investing movement is that "it originates in a changed model of what foundations do," observed Jay Rosen. Grantmakers "have discovered something similar to what journalists have discovered. They are very good at pursuing their own ideas about how to serve the public interest. What they aren't so good at is championing collective goods — strengthening civil society, engaging with the public, and cultivating public values." The challenge today, then, is not to throw one out in order to install the other, but simply to do both a little better.

THE PUBLIC AND THE ACADEMY

To what extent do the insights of public journalism and civil philanthropy apply to higher education? Is there a case to be made for an academy that connects the campus to the broader community? And how can colleges and universities be more responsive to the needs of civil society? These were perhaps the key questions taken up at the seminar. The theme was addressed in after-dinner talks by Thomas Bender and William Sullivan, and served as a focus for the entire second half of the seminar.

What has been lost in the universities and has to be regained is the ongoing sense of obligation to deal with society's needs.

Larry Vanderhoef
University of California, Davis

There seemed to be little disagreement that the institutions of higher education have become isolated from public life. More and more Americans look on the academy merely as a place for professors to get tenured and students to get credentialed. Major universities raise millions of dollars to study public problems, yet they rarely apply their research to the real needs of communities. As Hofstra University's Michael D'Innocenzo remarked, "we would like to think of universities as communities of discourse, but too often they turn out to be more like fiefdoms with tenured faculty, like feudal lords, doing essentially whatever they want." Lew Friedland described the University of Wisconsin where he teaches journalism as a "feudal" and "quasi-capitalistic" institution. On the one hand, he said, it follows the Hobbesian model of "war of each against all" — within departments, between departments, and between the institution and the board of

regents. On the other hand, "we largely orient our research toward the needs of large businesses." On top of that, he added, there is an "iron wall" between academic research and society at large.

Scott Clemons of the Florida House of Representatives noted that in his experience many colleges and universities respond to public demands by passing the buck to legislators. "They come to us and say, 'What are you going to do for us?' 'Will you give us a larger slice of the budget pie?'" As a result, he said, "we see universities as a problem we have to deal with, instead of a help in the search for solutions to other problems."

Several participants spoke of the widespread shift taking place in higher education from civic education, in its broadest sense, toward professional training. The fact that higher education is directing more and more of its attention to the needs of the private sector rather than the needs of civil society is bound to have troublesome consequences for the future. Larry Vanderhoef of the University of California, Davis, pointed out that the mission of the academy has historically been twofold — to make higher education available to more and more people, and to direct its efforts toward the needs of the greater society. "It's the second principle that seems to have gotten lost," he said. The challenge, therefore, is not so much to invent a new principle as to reinvigorate an old one.

In his after-dinner remarks, New York University's Thomas Bender offered an incisive overview of the social and historical forces that have driven a wedge between the academy and public life. He began his comments with the observation that the modern research university was founded by men of the highest civic ideals. Though they were educating a relatively privileged elite — future leaders in the worlds of government, finance, journalism — they nevertheless made it their mission to prepare students for an active public life. But this began to change with the rapid expansion of enrollment at the turn of the century, and again following World War II. The research university now began to assume a new mission. The aim shifted from preparing young people for public life to producing experts within disciplines who could apply specialized knowledge to the problems of public life.

This change had a number of troublesome consequences, according to Bender. First, it fostered a self-referential academic culture increasingly alienated from public life. The university was now "large enough" and "interesting enough" to "capture very smart people and keep them entertained without them having to pay much attention to a larger public." Second, it encouraged the production of specialized academic knowledge, as distinct from public or democratic knowledge. Third, and closely related, it put a

premium on authority and expertise and thereby promoted the doctrine of professionalism.

Bender went on to say that any hope of restoring the civic mission of the academy depends on its adoption of a more democratic institutional culture. "The university may have to demonstrate more of the qualities it's asking the public to demonstrate before it has much to offer the public." It must also acknowledge and respect different "habitats of knowledge," he said. "The idea of authoritative knowledge is quite a noble idea, but it's also a dangerous academic dream. It discourages what I would call intellectual bilingualism." Academic theories and specialized discourse have their place. The question is whether scholars can translate their knowledge into the language of public life. "Rather than simply assert our authority, we must offer our contribution and not claim to speak for the whole."

We can kill local democratic vitality by playing the expert; or, we can nourish that vitality by providing, first, a site for public conversation (universities are vastly underutilized as sites for public conversation), and, secondly, by becoming a partner in that conversation — not a controller, not a teller, but a partner.

Thomas Bender
New York University

Bender concluded with the assertion that "we can kill local democratic vitality by playing the expert; or, we can nourish that vitality, first, by providing a site for public conversation (universities are vastly underutilized as sites for public conversation) and, secondly, by becoming a partner in that conversation — not a controller, not a teller, but a partner. Authority in this model has to give way to dialogue and collaboration."

William Sullivan followed Bender with some brief reflections of his own on the disconnection between the academy and public life. The trouble with higher education today, he observed, is that it suffers from a diminished authority — authority not in the usual sense of the word, but as Hannah Arendt used to refer to it: as an essential defining purpose or identity. This kind of authority has less to do with power and influence and more to do with public trust and accountability. If we understand higher education as a public good, Sullivan said, then restoring the authority of the academy can only be done under the auspices of the public. "If you scan today's discourse about education, education is described primarily as a vehicle for individual economic advance. But there is something called common goods, or public goods, that are worth achieving too, because without them our particular goods are not stable or secure."

NEW DIRECTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A number of colleges and universities are taking up the challenge spelled out by Bender and Sullivan. Several seminar participants pointed to initiatives currently under way within the academy. These are projects aimed not only at creating more public spaces within the university, but incorporating deliberation and discussion about public issues into the curriculum, and building deeper and more reciprocal relationships with communities. At a more basic level, they are efforts to rethink the essential role of education in a democratic society.

A compelling example was offered by Jean Cameron of the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. She related how the college's administration began to push for a change in the core curriculum some years ago. "The faculty rallied and worked on it," she said. "But one of the things they discovered was they were unable to work together. They worked against each other. They would get up and share their own wisdom and throw their pearls at the feet of whatever. This is the way faculty meetings had generally gone." After repeated efforts, the dean decided it was time for a new approach. She brought in a moderator with some skills and experience in the process of deliberation. The dean also recognized that it was not enough to have just the faculty working on the problem — everyone at the college had to be involved. So the process was opened up to include the entire college community. What finally emerged from the effort was a new curriculum with an innovative community service dimension.

One of the most significant aspects of the story, according to Cameron, is that the effort began not as a grand initiative to change the college or to introduce a new civic mission. Rather, it began as a somewhat prosaic challenge — the need for a new core curriculum. "In changing our method of discourse," she said, "we were able to bring ourselves to a different level, and to create a public work we could be proud of."

Betty Knighton of the University of Charleston, West Virginia, reported on the growing number of colleges and universities convening National Issues Forums today. The forums not only offer tools for community problem solving, she explained, they also teach participants the art of deliberation. In one forum at the University of Charleston, for example, people came together to discuss their relationship as citizens to government institutions and elected officials. She recalled how a student had spoken up at the end of the forum. "She had never been to this kind of a program before. She said, 'I can't believe that I'm 19 years old, I'm a political science major, and I've never been involved in this kind of discussion before. I've been in debates. I've been taught how to debate. I've been taught how to look at

issues in partisan terms. But I've never been involved in this kind of a discussion before.' A woman across the room answered her and said, 'Don't feel bad, honey. I'm 75 and it's my first time too.'" The benefits of these sorts of forums, Knighton said, is that they teach people the skills of deliberation that they can then take with them into the community.

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>
> **Margaret Miller**
> **American Association of Higher Education**

The College of DuPage outside Chicago has taken the National Issues Forums model one step further by incorporating public deliberation into the core practices and goals of the institution, as Sadie Flucas pointed out. "We came to a recognition that if we were really going to be serious about developing the intellectual core of civic life, then what we needed to do was to have a more comprehensive plan for modeling citizenship standards. This year our president established a special advisory council or board for a DuPage Humanities Forum in recognition of the fact that, as an institution, we needed to have a plan for how we were going to engage the entire community in public deliberations." What the college is hoping, Flucas said, is that the initiative will encourage citizens to come together on their own to address community problems. "We think that with the comprehensive approach we are now using, we will be better able to serve the people within our school districts and get them involved in public deliberation. We are the only public institution of higher education within our school district, so we feel a very special obligation to do this."

THE IDEA OF PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

As these examples indicate, a growing number of academics are beginning to challenge conventional assumptions about civic education and experiment with new approaches. What can we learn from these efforts? How do they relate to the intellectual work being done by public scholars like Thomas Bender and William Sullivan? And do they point the way to a more clearly defined concept of public scholarship? The discussion of these questions revolved around three central themes: adopting civic practices within the academy, connecting research to the needs of the community, and reexamining the meaning and the uses of knowledge.

Modeling civic practices within the institution. Several participants pointed to the disjunction between what institutions of higher learning teach and what they practice. "We don't model for our students what it's

like to engage in civic discourse," said Margaret Miller, president of the American Association of Higher Education. "In most colleges and universities — at least at the departmental level — the conversation at the table isn't occurring." There are some schools where democratic discourse is part of the institutional culture, Miller said. But they are the exception rather than the rule. "I think the impact of that on our students is that they don't learn how to do it."

The starting point for genuine citizenship education is to cultivate the essential arts of democracy within the institution — the ability to think and frame issues in public terms, to engage with otherness, and to pursue new courses of action through deliberative inquiry. These are the skills of public problem solving which, in Lew Friedland's words, "bind people together" and help them "accomplish some common end."

> ***There is an iron wall between research and the kind of deliberation that goes on within the community.***
>
> **Lew Friedland**
> **University of Wisconsin-Madison**

Relocalizing the academy. Healing the rift between the academy and the public also involves grounding the activities of the institution within the larger community and seeking out new relationships that bridge the gap. One of the most common suggestions toward that end was for colleges and universities to serve as public spaces in the broadest possible sense. In this respect, community colleges have an obvious advantage over larger research universities since they are seen by the public as community resources. Robert McSpadden of Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida, described his campus as a "community space." Only one sitting president of the U.S. has ever visited Panama City, he said. But when he did, his event took place at Gulf Coast Community College. The college has served as a venue for town meetings, forums on race relations, debates about proposed highway bills, and study circles about affirmative action. McSpadden said that hosting and convening public events is a very direct and powerful way that institutions of higher learning can contribute to a more vital public sphere.

Making the academy more responsive to the community also involves working *with* the public, rather than *on behalf of* the public, by tailoring research to the real needs of people in their day-to-day lives. Harris Sokoloff of the University of Pennsylvania described it as "service research." Service research "meets all the criteria of disciplinary research," he said, but at the same time it's aimed at "making a difference in the communities in which it's conducted. It's not research *on*, it's research *with*." Sokoloff went on to say that people in colleges and universities "need to think of themselves as parts of larger communities" and "do their work in ways that create connections."

Rethinking the meaning and the uses of knowledge. A related challenge involves cultivating public knowledge, as distinct from authoritative knowledge. Public knowledge is the sort of knowledge that emerges from the give and take of collaborative inquiry. "Probably the most radical idea is that there is more than one way of looking at something," observed Caryn McTigh Musil of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The reigning idea today is that scholars provide expertise or extract information from the public rather than join with the public in the creation of knowledge. Public scholarship is a "much more dialogic, participatory, student-centered, project-oriented, collaborative" endeavor, Musil said. It recognizes that "knowledge is located in the students as well as in our heads. We certainly have a lot to offer. But the students, with the authority of their experience and with their situational knowledge, bring enormous things to the classroom." At bottom, she added, "we can't do our scholarship well if we don't have multiple sources that inform it and make it grow." The challenge is to "make the circle whole."

Thomas Bender cited a 1994 study, *The New Production of Knowledge*, by an international team of scholars who contend that in coming years more and more knowledge will be developed outside the halls of higher learning — in what Bender called "opportunistic and transdisciplinary" settings. The intellectual style in these places is different from that associated with the university. Theory is much closer to the "point of use" than with traditional academic knowledge. In a sense, this kind of knowledge dissolves the categorical distinction so often made between theory and practice. It's open-ended and embraces a plurality of perspectives.

The trouble with academic knowledge is that it's self-referential. Its meaning and usefulness are measured only in relation to what is already known within its given discipline. As Jay Rosen remarked, "the ultimate test of the knowledge produced by the institution must lie not within the institution, but outside of it. What you have achieved by going about the way you go about knowing has to be ultimately measured not within the university but in the community outside." The challenge is not to do away with academic knowledge but to engage what Bender called "the many habitats of knowledge."

What kind of ethos should characterize the public scholar? There has to be an ethic of listening to the public. There has to be an ethic that genuinely respects reciprocity and mutuality — the public is not just survey data. There also has to be an ethic that is respectful of difference and diversity, without radicalizing otherness. If otherness is radicalized, there is no possibility of finding common ground.

Tom Michaud
Wheeling Jesuit University

THE PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

There appeared to be a general consensus that addressing the disconnection between higher education and civil society must begin by tackling some of the systemic problems within the academy. One of the most challenging of these is the relatively low priority given to civic work. Zelda Gamson of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, observed that "until very recently, higher education has not been particularly interested in the civic agenda. College presidents have not taken that on. It's not 'normative.' It's kind of 'soft.' It's not particularly scholarly — even though the scholarly work on the issue of democracy and the breakdown of community and civic life has come from universities."

Another major obstacle is the fact that the modern research university is almost completely structured around academic disciplines. Harold Saunders, a member of the Board of Trustees at Princeton University, noted that the most promising work taking place within the academy is being done by individuals, not academic departments. The challenge is to break out of disciplinary boundaries — or perhaps to redefine and expand them. The question we must ask, Saunders said, is "how can universities encourage people to do that without asking them to throw away all they have invested in those disciplines?"

The question prompted several good observations. Fairinda West of Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois, commented that it's important for people within the academy not only to speak across disciplinary boundaries, but to "speak across roles." She recalled a recent forum at her community college where this method was especially productive. Trustees, faculty, staff, students, and even members of the grounds crew came together to deliberate on the issue of local governance. What they discovered was that people quickly dispensed with their professional identi-

The idea of authoritative knowledge is quite a noble idea, but it is also a dangerous academic dream. It discourages what I would call intellectual bilingualism. I'm not against esoteric language and complicated theories in academia — we would never get anywhere if we did not have them. The question is whether we can speak two languages, whether we can speak one language in its appropriate place and another language in another place. We have to be in open communication with as many different habitats of knowledge as we can, and to do that we cannot feel that our knowledge is superior. The superiority or inferiority will come out, if it is relevant at all, in the process of dialogue.

Thomas Bender
New York University

ties and spoke out as concerned citizens.

Another way to overcome institutional boundaries is to teach interdisciplinary courses, according to West. This sort of teaching is not only professionally satisfying, but "it models for students a way in which professionals can deliberate and consider issues without being bounded by specialized language." Interdisciplinary education is really an effort to create a "third language," she said — not an academic language or a street language, but a shared language constructed in the course of addressing a common interest.

Not all colleges and universities are organized around disciplines. Some institutions are guided instead by a central mission or principle, such as service. Henry Ponder, president of the National Association for Equal Opportunities in Higher Education, explained that private colleges and universities born out of the struggle for expanded access and opportunity tend to be driven by different imperatives than traditional research universities. Service is typically an integral part of the curriculum at these schools. They often strike up partnerships with local civic associations and make campus facilities available to the community. In addition, these schools tend to emphasize the value of institutionwide forums and debates about the school's role in the community, tenure, and other issues. On occasion, they open up the decision-making process to include faculty and even students. According to Ponder, these institutions model a different relationship to public life from which other schools can learn.

Evidently, some universities and associations are learning from these examples. James Murray III, vice president of the American Council on Education, pointed to some of the discussions going on in his and other presidential associations. The work focuses not only on education for civic responsibility, but also on fostering a more active role for colleges and universities within the community. "We need to have a much greater consciousness on the part of our leadership," Murray said. "We also need better cooperation and better communication. We do a terrible job at that."

Several participants observed that the impulse to change must be a collective one. As Michael D'Innocenzo put it, "it's not going to work if it's from the top down — if it's college presidents, chancellors, or deans of the higher education establishment. And it's not going to work if it's from the bottom up. It really has to

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Thomas Longin
Association of Governing Boards

be a shared endeavor." A first step, he said, is for everyone within the institution to come together and ask what can be done.

Governing boards have an especially important role to play here, observed Thomas Longin of the Association of Governing Boards. They have control over the mission, the programs, and the resources of the institution. Unless they see the value of change, they are going to resist it and thereby prevent any substantive reforms from taking place. The key, Longin said, is for boards to recognize their role as facilitators of dialogue. They need to bring in a range of perspectives and ideas, not just from within the institution, but also from the community at large. "If the common wisdom is that students and faculty and community interests don't belong on boards of trustees, then we are very, very far away from beginning a useful conversation."

Longin went on to say that the problems of higher education "will not be solved at the departmental level or the school level or interdivisionally within the institutions, and they will not be solved by the institutions alone. Dialogue has to transcend existing structures of government within the institutions or it will not work."

Margaret Miller added that governing boards ask the crucial question: "So what?" One of their key functions is to demand accountability and self-assessment within the institution. These qualities are not well rooted in the academy, in her view. Research tends to be directed outward, toward society at large, but rarely toward the functioning of the institution itself. As a result, it's difficult to know whether the instruction and research taking place are serving their desired purpose.

SUMMARY

The impulse to nurture and strengthen public life is effecting widespread change across the country — in newsrooms, in foundations, on campuses, in state legislatures and city halls. Professional reform efforts aimed at rethinking the traditional dichotomy between institutions and the public are already well along in journalism and philanthropy. Whether these ideas will take root in the field of higher education remains to be seen. But as the seminar drew to a close, there was a bracing sense of commitment and possibility, in spite of the many practical challenges involved.

Current trends aimed at relocalizing the institutions of higher learning, articulating a concept of public scholarship, and reassessing the relationship between the expert and the public certainly suggest a movement in the right direction. Each of these efforts is founded on the idea of higher education as a public good, as an essential component of a robust public sphere. Still, countervailing trends within the academy, especially the shift away from civic education toward preparing students for the job market, may limit the overall effectiveness of these initiatives.

Reform efforts in higher education face a different set of obstacles than they do in journalism and philanthropy. Higher education is a vast and diverse field in which scholars, administrators, students, and trustees too often find themselves at cross purposes. As David Mathews noted in his closing remarks, "I hear very different conversation coming from students, faculty members, associations, and boards. I hear one group talking about planning. I hear one group talking about management. I hear one group talking about the pressures from legislators." Unless the academy can find a way to reconcile these conflicting modes of discourse, reform efforts may be tenuous at best.

Success may ultimately depend on whether the forces of change link up and cohere into a new movement. The main ingredients are already in place, as Jay Rosen pointed out — "leadership from the top, diversity of players, convening organizations, certain kinds of strategies, some key lessons, and some money." On the other hand, history shows that forces do not always converge. "There can be the ingredients of change, but they just never get together," in Mathews' words. "When forces do converge, though, there is the possibility of real and dramatic change."

If the forces do converge — and there is reason to hope that they will — the Washington gathering may be remembered as a small but important step in paving the way.

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